

[Postpartum Blues?](#)

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MOTHERHOOD

Postpartum Blues?

Modern moms aren't depressed after baby's birth, just worn to a frazzle

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Pregnancy, childbirth and parenting present intense challenges for all women, challenges that are compounded in industrialized societies where the absence of familial and social support compels women to raise their babies all by themselves. Round-the-clock care for a totally dependent infant leaves a woman exhausted and depleted, especially when she can find no time to recharge her own body, mind and spirit. If she goes back to work, either by personal choice or due to economic necessity, she faces the additional stress of leaving her child with a paid caregiver. Many women facing such challenges experience feelings of guilt, frustration, inadequacy and incompetence. Some women begin to blame themselves for everything that goes wrong with the baby or with their family and social relationship. Others feel victimized and begin to blame everyone around them for their problems. Many women feel anger and resentment toward their own babies. All are feelings which may cause mothers to neglect both their babies and themselves, for the simple reason that they find themselves overwhelmed by the all-consuming task of motherhood.

Western medical textbooks--none of which were written by members of child-centered ancient societies, where support from extended families is the norm for new mothers--typically label women's stressed-out feelings after giving birth "postpartum depression." They attribute the whole situation to hormonal changes triggered by pregnancy and childbirth. These books even go to the extent of recommending antidepressant medications for mothers who are not feeling happy in the postpartum period. I don't dispute that some cases genuinely fit the clinical description of postpartum depression. But for the majority of cases, these books leave me feeling as though women are simply considered to be the sum total of their hormones and body parts. What about considering them as integral parts of an entity larger than themselves, even valued members of families and society?

This is where ancient cultures have something to offer. In all traditional societies, such as the aboriginal culture of Australia, the tribal societies of the South American rainforest and the many ancient societies in India--extended family and society at large are predominantly child-centered, providing ample support to women in their childbearing years. In India, where I was born and raised, new mothers receive practical wisdom and hands-on experience from all the elders in their families and neighborhoods. While young women observe how elders (both women and men) handle babies, they learn valuable lessons, sacred traditions and samskaras (the sacramental blessings during childhood) and the various tricks of the trade that make child rearing a fun and truly joyful experience. I saw this happen in my own family, where my mother spent fifty-six years of married life raising six children of her own and helped to raise eight grandchildren. She also assisted many women give birth and raise children in our neighborhood. It is

interesting for me to recall that our neighborhood included families practicing six different religions and speaking at least ten different Indian languages. But these differences never mattered when it came to extending help and support to young mothers. I saw many other women doing the same as my mother all their lives--giving and taking help from each other in raising children. In this entire intimate interaction, money never changed hands. What is surprising is that I never ran into a woman--educated or illiterate, employed or stay-at-home, rich or poor, young or old--whose mental state even remotely fit the description of "postpartum depression" after the birth of her child. They all seemed to genuinely enjoy mothering.

How could this be? When I asked my mother this question, with the humbleness of a student, she told me that running strong and deep beneath the tradition of family and social support were undercurrents of ancient cultural beliefs. She reminded me of the passage in the Bhagavad Gita in which Sri Krishna tells Arjuna that each new life or body of a child is a new garment worn by the soul. This garment is shed at death. Thereafter, depending on the karmic balance generated in one's lifetime, either a new garment is acquired by the soul in its progressive journey toward eternity or it attains Moksha, that is, liberation from the repetitive cycle of birth and death. She pointed out other Vedic verses and the Tamil scripture, Tirukural, that describes childhood as the budding stage in the cycle of life. But she said that ultimately it is not necessary to scan the scriptures looking for verses applicable to the situation. It is in fact sufficient to remember that every new baby in a mother's arms is a soul wearing a brand new, pure, delicate garment.

This garment needs round-the-clock love, nurturing, nursing and care so that it can thrive and bloom into a body that will facilitate unhindered expression of all the potentials of the resident soul. A mother, thus, is not just a soul's port of entry into the visible world, she is also the prime nurturer of the body in which the soul lives, a body that is an indispensable vehicle allowing the soul to play its part in the ongoing karmic cycle. When a mother tends to her baby's physical needs--nursing, cleaning, bathing, feeding, talking, singing and playing--she is in fact nurturing her baby's soul, and therefore she deserves every possible support and help from family and society. When the culture as a whole views the mother-baby relationship in this way, help for new mothers comes naturally. And the cultural values that encourage a mother to view her baby with a sense of respect, reverence, devotion and duty make it easier for the mother to nurture the soul of her baby. This set of positive attitudes also helps the mother find balance and purpose and reminds her that her all-consuming involvement with the baby is not an obsession but a spiritual commitment. The purpose of her nurturing relationship with her child is to honor that commitment.

It may be hard to imagine having respect and reverence for a baby that is completely dependent on its mother for all its needs. But when cultivated, this attitude can help the mother understand her role in the birth of a human being. If babies are born as a result of the physical union of male and female--and life begins exactly when the sperm and ovum unite to form an embryo, as science seems to understand and explain with such loud and arrogant confidence--then how is it that the fundamental questions about life (how, when, why, what, where and who) remain unanswered or only vaguely answered? In relationship to her baby, it is safe for the mother

to understand that her baby's life, and all life, is planned, created, expressed and terminated by a higher cosmic intelligence for fulfilling a cosmic design. The Vedas call this cosmic intelligence "God" and the cosmic design "God's wish."

A baby in a mother's arm is thus a baby born by God's direction for fulfilling God's wish, and hence, deserves pure respect and reverence. Remembering the cosmic design can help a new mother gain confidence as well. The unfolding of life is unpredictable, and a mother's mind can become clouded with apprehension and fear regarding her baby's future. To dispel this fear, a mother should pray to God, any God she believes in, and pray as well to all the positive energies of the universe, to help her baby become a human being who will be a source of positive goodness for his or her fellow human beings.

At no time should a mother think that she is greater than her baby just because she has given the baby birth. She cannot predict the future. It is quite possible that her baby could grow up to be a wise sage. After all, Shankaracharya, Buddha, Ramana Maharishi and all their peers were born as tiny babies who nursed at their mother's breasts. When the future is so unknown and yet so full of divine possibilities, a mother would be wise to approach her baby with devotion and discharge all her mothering duties with a cheerful, giving heart.

Sometimes when a mother displays devotion to her baby in a modern Western setting, she is suspected of having an unhealthy attachment to the child. People accuse her of projecting her own insecurities onto the baby and focusing on

the baby with pathological obsession. Or they suggest that her attitude indicates possessiveness and dependence on the baby for her own fulfillment and identity. Well, a baby comes to a mother's arms only for a while. The womb is a safe haven only for about forty weeks. Breasts give nourishment only for about a year. Mother's lap is a home and shelter only until the baby learns to crawl and walk. Mother's presence is a powerbase only until a child develops his or her own individual identity and sense of self. Thereafter, mother becomes a symbol of motherhood. In the present-day culture that has forgotten about worshiping the sacred energy of the feminine, a mother can hope to have any lasting shelf life only if she has learned the art of loving her baby and letting him go.

Rather than clinging to the baby for her own security and identity, a mother should let the child go from her lap into the lap of the waiting world, where the baby blossoms and plays out his or her destiny. When a mother sees herself as a road to this eventual and inevitable unfolding, she will remember to develop love coupled with detachment, which works as an antidote for possessiveness and overprotectiveness. Although a mother's own baby is always a one-in-a-million wonder, remembering that he or she is only one of a million other wonders prevents a mother from developing a pathological obsession with her child. She learns to treat all children, born to all mothers, with compassion and love, thus becoming an image of the Universal Mother, the feminine energy that nurtures and sustains the entire creation.

It is well-known that pregnancy and the first few years of human life lay the foundation for the future of human society. These magical phases pass very quickly and are filled with the

astonishing wonders of nature. It is truly amazing to carry a fetus, deliver a baby, raise that baby into a little child and lead that child onto a path in life that will witness unfolding of his or her destiny. No matter how daunting, challenging and stressful these times are in a woman's life, if she looks at them with a devotional, prayerful attitude, she can experience the rich joy and the sense of creative accomplishment in motherhood that more than compensates for its difficulty and stress. And thus, this time-tested set of positive attitudes can successfully beat the postpartum blues. The change of attitude is a private exercise a woman can practice in the quiet realm of her own mind, thereby turning the most challenging time of her life into an opportunity for the growth of inner strength and wisdom, justifying the honor given to her by her baby, the honor of being a mother.

In India, this set of positive attitudes toward the mother-child relationship can be traced to ancient Hindu scriptures. People who believe in and live by the code of conduct prescribed by these scriptures successfully create a child-centered society and offer extensive, generous and practical support to women in their childbearing years. Women in any circumstances, from any culture, lifestyle or faith, can cultivate these attitudes in themselves. I hope the future of America sees just such a change.

The Author

Vatsala, 38, was born in Bihar, India. After receiving a degree in microbiology, she married Inner Traditions publisher Ehud C. Sperling and joined him in Vermont, USA, to raise a family. She has one son, Mahar.

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